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ABSTRACT

Accountability in teaching and learning means assuring that each student develops as near as possible to his full potential the knowledge, skills, and interpersonal behaviors that the community and the school accept as goals. Many people both in and out of the teaching profession are aware of the complex conditions required if the profession is to be accountable. To secure such conditions, teachers must have the major voice in deciding those matters that relate directly to teaching. Even then there must be recognition that the outcomes of education are dependent on many factors, some not wholly controlled by educators. The definition of accountability includes many dimensions and will require refinement. Questions remain regarding performance criteria and performance contracting; criteria for evaluation of teaching ability or learning products; and questions of responsibility not only for basic reading and arithmetic skills but also for interpersonal behavioral skills, a broad range of subject matter content, and wholesome attitudes and values. Accountability needs to be considered in the broad context of accountability under what conditions, by whom, to whom, for what actions and outcomes, and to what degree and over what period of time. (JS)

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THE MEANING OF ACCOUNTABILITY: A WORKING PAPER

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The teaching profession[1] is committed to being accountable. Accountability in teaching and learning means assuring[2] that each student develops as near as possible to his full potential the knowledge, skills, and interpersonal behaviors that the community and the school accept as goals.

The historical progress of both the profession and the public in gaining such assurance[3] is well documented. But today many citizens and other prominent observers of the American scene realize that accomplishments have not been rapid and adequate enough to meet the demands of the changing society.

Conditions for Being Accountable

Many people both in and out of the teaching profession are aware of the complex conditions required if the profession is to be accountable for every child learning all he is capable of. Some of the most important conditions are:

1. Clear goals for schools, based on both local values and priorities and national purposes.
2. Acceptance of expert judgment on appropriate teaching and learning to achieve such goals.

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[1] As used in this statement "teaching profession" includes public and private elementary and secondary school teachers, administrators, supervisors, and consultants; professional personnel in higher education; and professional staff in organizations, government offices of education, and private agencies.

[2] To all concerned--parents, others (citizens), students, governing bodies, the profession itself.

[3] The idea of accountability is not new. Ten years ago Paul Mort predicted, in A Progress Report on the School of 1980, that by 1980 the public would hold the profession responsible for children learning all those things on which the community placed priority.

3. An adequate number of personnel with sufficient skills to perform so that accepted goals are achieved.
4. Provision for identifying, educating, retaining, and continuously reeducating teachers to assure that they will always be up to date.
5. Teaching loads, time, and support services which are conducive to quality performance.
6. Appropriate media, materials, facilities, and learning resources.
7. Satisfactory salaries and welfare programs for teaching personnel.
8. High morale on the part of those who teach.
9. Appropriate evaluation of all the goals of instruction--academic, attitudinal, humanistic and behavioral--taking into account that the educational process itself should be highly valued and judged along with learning outcomes.
10. Leadership in individual schools that fosters a wholesome social-psychological setting, an openness to constructive change, and a climate conducive to teacher and student success.
11. Strong public commitment to education expressed in both moral and financial support.
12. Provision by top administrators and boards of education of material resources, psychological climate, and the freedom needed to ensure top performance by both teachers and students.

When these conditions are present, the profession will be in a position to be accountable.

Securing the Conditions

To secure the above conditions, teachers must have the major voice in deciding those matters that relate directly to teaching. For example, they must be largely responsible for determining who shall be candidates for the profession and by what standards teachers shall be prepared (including accreditation of institutions), evaluated, retained, dismissed, certified, and given tenure; how teachers shall be educated in service; how the curriculum shall be developed; and how media and materials shall be selected. Only when teachers' expertise is applied to these determinations can teachers be held more accountable.

Some Limitations

Even when decisions on these matters have been delegated to the profession, there must be recognition that the outcomes of education are dependent on many factors, some not wholly controlled by educators. Just as the physician cannot be accountable for the patient's total health because he is frequently unable to influence dietary habits, exercise and emotional attitude, so the teacher cannot be totally accountable for every aspect of the education of the child because there will always be outside influences such as home, community, and mass media. The makeup of the individual child, his interests, and his emotional and physical status are also important influences. Obviously, the school should and will assume responsibility for some portion of these, but not all.

Some Specific Dimensions of Accountability

The definition of accountability on page 1 includes many dimensions of the concept, but it will require refinement. The aspects dealt with below represent only parts of a larger whole.

As used currently in many quarters, "accountability" describes performance criteria and performance contracting. In most instances, either particular teacher acts (such as the ability to ask inductively oriented questions) or limited learning outcomes (such as the achievement of an established norm on standardized reading and mathematics examinations) are used as criteria of successful teaching.

Doubtless the best criterion of teaching ability is the learning it produces in students. However, assembling the evidence of teaching ability is no simple task. Were it so, performance criteria might have been broadly used long before now. But up to now, there has been no consensus on a definition of good teaching, even though progress has been made in identifying some key behaviors. This being so, criteria for evaluation, and their application continue to be troublesome. There are still many questions to be resolved, among them:

1. Are there a variety of techniques as yet unidentified in current performance standards for getting students to think inductively?
2. May not the most appropriate techniques leading to inductive thinking depend heavily on individual differences in learning styles and learning rates?

3. Does par performance on a standardized reading or mathematics test indicate that the student will know or be able to use the knowledge several years hence?[4]

4. Does learning how to read assure that the child will read?

Certainly, all teachers want their students to learn to read and master basic number concepts well enough to function as effective workers and contributing citizens in the society. There will continue to be great emphasis on these goals, but much of the failure to reach them can be attributed to insufficiency in one or more of the conditions cited above -- particularly, insufficient staff to identify and correct individual learning difficulties. Simply judging a teacher's competence on the basis of outcomes which are affected by many factors beyond the teacher's control, or worse yet, gearing teachers' salaries to students' scores on tests, is not likely to get at the major reasons why students don't learn.

In addition, and at least as important as the basic skills, should be responsibility for student mastery of interpersonal behavior skills, a broad range of subject matter content, and wholesome attitudes and values. The responsibility for most of these must be shared with the home and other agencies. For example, how can the school ensure that a child will choose "quality" television programs[5] or movies when others in his home watch television indiscriminately? This is even more difficult when

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[4]This is a matter of immediate as compared to ultimate accountability and deserves serious consideration. Assuring that a student will master given learnings today does not guarantee that he will ever be able to use them in a constructive way. Measuring the ultimate effect of teaching on the product would require following the student throughout life, evaluating his total behavior at intervals, and sorting out the behaviors for which the school was responsible from those resulting from other influences.

[5]The example is no minor matter; children spend nearly as much time in front of the television as they do in the school.

there is so little agreement on what constitutes quality in such areas. Unlike private enterprise where quality can be measured by a few criteria--the product works, it sells, profit margin is high--the things for which the school is accountable are complex and difficult to define.

Other aspects of performance criteria complicate the situation. When are performance criteria to be applied to teachers, when to students, when to both? When can a direct cause and effect relationship be expected? For example, if a teacher has mastered fully the art of asking questions inductively, does it follow that all students will then be caused to master inductive thinking. To what extent will a student's background, earlier experience, current physical and emotional condition, and particular learning setting influence the outcomes of even the most adequate performance by a teacher?

Issues to be Settled

It is clear that the meaning of accountability is complicated. It requires taking into account a broad range of conditions. It needs to be considered in the broad context of:

Accountability under what conditions?

Accountability by whom?

Accountability to whom?

Accountability for what a .ions and outcomes?

Accountability to what degree and over what period of time?